Maharlika

PINOY LIFE IN THE MARIANAS

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Pinoy Komiks

Former Saipan Unity Lions Club president Joe Digno has launched the first Tagalog komiks in the CNMI, intended for all Filipinos working and staying abroad.

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Retro Party

The Tropex Garden compound in Fina Sisu turned back time Saturday night when owner and president Lito Mendoza celebrated his 60th birthday with a '60s and '70s theme.

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49 inmates escape from RP jail

Between 20 and 25 heavily armed men, believed to be members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, raided the North Cotabato provincial jail and freed three suspected bombers and 46 other inmates early Friday, authorities said.

But MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu denied that members of the Muslim rebel group attacked the jail and welcomed an investigation, although he said they were checking whether some of the escapees indeed belonged to the MILF.

The MILF, which has been fighting for self-rule in the southern region of Mindanao, has an estimated 11,000 armed fighters, some in rebel strongholds in North Cotabato.

It has been engaged in Malaysian-brokered peace talks with the government and has forged a ceasefire.

49 INMATES Page 2

AP

CALL FOR CLEAN POLLS

Protesters carry broom with slogans as they march toward the Commission on Elections office during a rally Friday, Feb. 2, 2007, in Manila calling for a clean election. The protesters pressed for the implementation of the automation law in the coming May elections stressing that it will assure them of a clean elections and alleged that it will put to an end the controversy generated by one of its former election commissioner during the 2004 election.

LIGAYA ALMODIEL

A new lease on life

By AGNES E. DONATO
REPORTER

As she has for the last 10 years, Ligaya Almodiel headed straight home after work on the evening of Sept. 9, 2006. She was looking forward to a relaxing evening and thinking about her birthday, then only two days away.

With a co-worker in the driver seat, she and a friend hopped in her yet-to-be-paid car and began the drive from the Garapan beauty shop that she manages, to her Chalan Kanoa apartment.

She was only a few minutes away from home when Almodiel's uneventful routine was suddenly shattered. An oncoming van struck her car, hitting the passenger side. The van's driver immediately fled the accident scene, never to identify himself.

A NEW Page 2

Tuloy Aral program seeking sponsors anew

By MARCONI CALINDAS
REPORTER

The Philippine government's Overseas Workers Welfare Administration office on Saipan has started to distribute invitation letters to generous community members in the CNMI for the "Tuloy Aral Program," in time for the next school year in the Philippines.

OWWA welfare officer Lourdes Mabagal told Saipan Tribune yesterday that she has started inviting individuals and groups who want to help

TULOY Page 2

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PINOYNEWS

Information Caravan at CMS Compound

Filipino workers residing around Garapan and Gualo Rai are invited to the Philippine Consulate Office's Info Caravan tomorrow, Sunday, 1pm, at the CMS Compound in Gualo Rai.

OWWA welfare officer Lourdes Mabagal said Filipinos living in Quartermaster Road, Oleai, Chinatown and Navy Hill are also welcome to attend the event.

The caravan is a campaign to disseminate accurate information about the services of the Philippine Consulate Office in the CNMI and its sub-offices such as the Philippine Overseas Labor Office and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration.

Labor Attaché Joan Lourdes Lavilla said the project is a yearlong program targeting villages and Filipino workers who couldn't find the time to visit the Philippine Consulate General due to a lack of time.

The Information Caravan was launched last Jan. 14 at the Sablan Compound in San Antonio. The campaign was once again a success during its last Sunday's campaign in Kannat Tabla.

Taiwan recruiters oppose no-placement fee policy

By VERONICA UY
INQUIRER.NET

While Taiwanese recruiters are not against the increase from $200 to $400 in the minimum wage of Filipino domestic helpers, they are against the policy prohibiting the collection of placement fees from the workers.

Jackson Gan, head of the Pilipino Manpower Agencies to Taiwan or Pilmat, told INQUIRER.net in a phone interview that the Taiwan Manpower Association met with labor attaché Reynaldo Gopez last January 25 to object to the POEA policy and warned they would shift their job orders for caretakers to Vietnam and Indonesia.

Filipino caretakers, who the new rules of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) classify as household service workers, pay Filipino recruiters a one-time fee of one month's salary and pay the Taiwanese manning agencies monthly dues of from $30 to $35.

Banning the collection of placement fees would greatly affect the deployment of Filipino caretakers to Taiwan who receive an average pay equal to P25,000 a month.

Gan said the new policy against collecting fees also runs counter to a binding labor agreement between the Philippines and Taiwan.

Since 1992, POEA has classified Taiwan as a "special market," meaning Filipino workers' working conditions and welfare should be well protected.

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49 INMATES

FROM PAGE 1

Authorities had initially tried to put a lid on the raid but word still leaked out.

Assistant Jail Warden Redentor Marasigan said his men were outnumbered and overpowered when the attackers, armed with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, struck at around 1 a.m.

He said the raiders also posted snipers as backup.

In a separate interview with the Associated Press, Marasigan said at least 25 men with grenade launchers and rifles destroyed the padlocks of six cells after they blasted their way into the overcrowded North Cotabato provincial jail.

Four guards put up a defense by opening fire on the attackers, setting off a brief clash that wounded at least one inmate and three guards, Marasigan said.

The guards were quickly overwhelmed by the attackers, who used an M203 grenade launcher to gain entry into the one-story building, he said.

"There was a brief firefight, but jail guards later had to seek cover and withdrew after grenade and sniper assaults from the enemies continued to come in," Marasigan said.

After forcing open the cells, the armed men herded out three inmates being tried for alleged involvement in a 2003 bomb attack, along with dozens of other inmates, he said.

They fled toward a hilly, forested area at the back of the jail, which houses more than 780 inmates—about double its capacity, Marasigan said. Most inmates refused to join the escape, he said.

Marasigan named the suspected bombing escapees as Datu Ali Sultan and two others identified only through their surnames—Guido and Mundos.

Chief Superintendent German Doria, Central Mindanao police chief, said in an interview with INQUIRER.net earlier on Friday that there was a 30-minute firefight.

Doria said the provincial jail, which is under the jurisdiction of the provincial government, did not have additional security from police before the jailbreak happened.

"The PNP [Philippine National Police] is not directly responsible sa [for] jail [management] but with threats like this, we requested them to secure the jail. But at the time na nangyari ito [that this happened], we had only the jail's security forces," said Doria.

A manhunt was immediately launched for the escaped inmates, with Governor Emmanuel Piñol offering a P25,000-reward for those who could help recapture the escapees, said Doria.

He said the police and military set up checkpoints after learning of the jailbreak.

"We have pinpointed their [inmates'] escape route and we are hoping for positive results this afternoon," said Doria.

Provincial jail warden Noli Pinol said in a report to the governor that some 60 armed men joined the initial attack at the back of the jail, and then 20 to 25 men in fatigues went into the jail compound. The attackers pulled detainees out and warned others they would be killed if they resisted, he added.

Of the escapees, at least 12 were facing murder charges, including six charged with multiple murders, while others were facing charges for kidnapping and other serious crimes, he said.

Pinol said he has long asked the government to confine inmates accused of serious crimes like bombing, kidnapping and terror attacks in special, heavily secured detention buildings because poorly guarded rural jails are vulnerable to attacks. *(PDI/AP)*

TULOY

FROM PAGE 1

the children of former overseas Filipino workers who were not successful in their work abroad.

Although the new school year in the Philippines is still in June, Mabagal said it would be best to help the kids in April and May, before enrollment time. She said she has already received favorable responses from CNMI community members. She said her office would be more aggressive in inviting people next month.

In 2006, the CNMI was honored and recognized—for the second time—after garnering a record of 84 individuals and groups who have agreed to support OWWA's Tuloy-Aral Project.

OWWA's Overseas Operations Coordinating Service office congratulated the satellite office in the CNMI for bringing in the highest number of Tuloy-Aral Project sponsors and for being No. 1 among OWWA offices in the world.

Mabagal said she is hoping that the CNMI would sustain this position for 2007. "For me, giving the children social equity especially in education, is the best help we can given," she added.

She said the program has a huge impact on the kids' lives and really makes a difference. "Education should be our focus in life. It is important because it can make a difference," Mabagal said.

The welfare officer said the program is very essential because it is a means to connect and bridge the young Filipino students to scholarship opportunities.

Last year, the program beneficiaries in the Philippines were children from the National Capital Region, the Cordillera Administrative Region, Region 1, Region 2, Region 6, Region 7, Region 8, and Caraga province.

The Tuloy Aral Project is an OWWA project not only in the CNMI but also in other parts of the world where there are OWWA offices. It aims to help children of former overseas Filipino workers and other needy children in the Philippines fulfill their dream of continuing their education. With the money, the children will be provided school necessities such as notebooks, pens, pads, bags, and books, among others.

Besides the $100 sponsorship, there are no other requirements to extend help to the students.

When an individual has expressed his interest in helping out, the CNMI OWWA office calls the Manila Office so that it can allot a recipient from the Philippines. The OWWA office will then notify the CNMI office to confirm the sponsorship.

For more information on how to extend assistance, donors can visit the OWWA office located at the ground floor of the Marianas Business Plaza in Susupe.

The campaign this Sunday will be in collaboration with the OWWA-OFW Support Group. Consulate officials will lead the Information Caravan. The group will next visit the San Roque parish.

The campaign is part of extra efforts to increase awareness among overseas Filipino workers in the CNMI about their rights and privileges such as maintaining their OWWA membership status. The caravan will visit villages around the CNMI and talk to Filipino workers and some of their employers. *(Marconi Calindas)*

A NEW

FROM PAGE 1

Meanwhile, the impact left Almodiel unconscious, with her ribs, clavicle and hip on the right side all broken. Almodiel spent almost four weeks in the hospital. According to her medical report, tubes had to be placed in each of her lungs to alleviate a chest problem. She suffered from severe shoulder stiffness. Worst of all, the complicated fracture of her right hip required operation and metal work to hold the bones together.

Needless to say, things will never be normal for her again.

The parts of her body affected by the accident hurt, especially at dawn. She limps. She spends hours a week on rehabilitation and therapy. Although she has managed to return to work in the first week of December, she continues to take baby steps, making sure she does not overexert herself.

"I never thought this could happen to me. I barely went anywhere besides work. If I wasn't working, I stayed home," Almodiel said in an interview last week at K's International Beauty Center, which she has worked as manager for 10 years.

But even in the face of tragedy, she maintains the hopeful spirit that allowed her to recover faster than her doctors had expected. She is already looking forward to getting back to jogging within a year.

A single parent, Almodiel said she is trying to survive for her three children, all of whom she is currently sending to college.

Almodiel also credits her friends for keeping her morale high. Their frequent visits made her a mini-celebrity at the Commonwealth Health Center during her hospital confinement. Their encouraging letters, as well as the financial support they provided, kept depression at bay.

"I didn't know I had so many friends. My staff took care of me. Even customers I hadn't seen for years came to visit and offer their support. I want to thank them all," she said.

First Tagalog komiks launched in NMI

By FERDIE P. DE LA TORRE
REPORTER

FERDIE DE LA TORRE

Publisher/editor Joe L. Digno and assistant editor Romy I. Cal (sitting from right to left) and their printing staff (standing from left to right) Nestor Tapel, Joe Osorio, and Bong Balucan show the first issue of Komix Pinoy. The second issue of the first Tagalog komiks in the CNMI will be released today.

Former Saipan Unity Lions Club president Joe Digno has launched the first Tagalog komiks in the CNMI.

Digno, manager of Graphics and DL Corp. that operates Cooking Gas, serves as editor and publisher of Komix Pinoy that recently hit the newsstands.

Komix Pinoy is the brainchild of veteran graphic artist Romy I. Cal, who is the publication's assistant editor.

Dante Guarda is the story writer and illustrator. Kristine Delos Reyes takes the role as part-time story writer and Lacymor is the cartoonist/layout artist.

The small pocketbook-sized Komiks Pinoy has a good lineup of contributors that include Fr. Rev. Nonoy E. Recaido Jr., businessman Pastor B. Gagaring, Conching I. Cal, and Amihan King-Pableo.

Gagaring is the host/producer of Usapang Pinoy, a defunct weekly TV program at the former Saipan Cable TV System.

Komiks Pinoy is a bi-weekly publication printed by Graphics. It costs only $1 a copy, but for the meantime Digno and his staff are offering them for free.

Digno said Komix Pinoy is offered to all Filipinos working and staying abroad.

Digno said he is dedicating the publication to his late father, Emilio S. Digno, who became part of komiks production in the Philippines when he worked at Capitol Publishing, a known komiks publisher in the country.

"Whenever I see komiks, I always remember my father and recall how happy we were to read the komiks that he would bring home," Digno said.

He said the writers and novel illustrators of Komix Pinoy are all overseas Filipino workers who have no professional experience in writing and drawing novels.

"Our writers and illustrators have natural talents and they come up with this reading material to help our countrymen abroad overcome sadness and boredom away from their families," the publisher pointed out.

Digno said their writers voluntarily contributed their stories, which are all fictional and original.

"We will do our best to offer good quality komiks to our readers. And we will try to further improve our publication to the best of our ability," he said.

Filipinos in the CNMI are encouraged to get a free copy of Komix Pinoy's second release that will be out on the streets today. Copies can be found at remittance centers on Saipan and at establishments owned by AM Enterprises on Tinian and SD Enterprises on Rota.

Komix Pinoy's office is located at Graphics near the Gualo Rai basketball court. The telephone number is (670) 235-5496 and the telefax is (670) 288-5496. Its mailing address is P.O. Box 505460 Saipan, MP 96950.

LABOR FRONT

Misleading the workers

By FERDIE P. DE LA TORRE
REPORTER

Q: A restaurant owner told his workers he was closing the business and going off-island. The employer promised he would soon re-open the restaurant. Contrary to his promises, the employer never returned to the CNMI. What kind of claims the workers are entitled to file?

A: The workers can file a labor claim of abandonment, improper termination, and breach of employment contract.

Labor administrative hearing officer Jerry Cody, in a different case but with similar circumstances, found the employer to have abandoned a worker and breached the employment contract when he closed his business and departed the CNMI. Cody pointed out that, although closure of a business may constitute valid grounds to terminate a worker's employment contract, the employer must follow proper procedures to be relieved from his or her contractual obligations for the remainder of the contract.

■ ■ ■

Q: To avoid violating labor laws, what should an employer do if he or she feels that the business if about to close?

A: The employer must give advance written notice of the closure to the Labor director and the employees. The employer must pay the workers any back wages owed, plus wages for the advance notice period.

■ ■ ■

Q: What sanctions can be imposed on an employer who misleads his or her workers into believing that the business was only closing temporarily, but is actually closing it permanently?

A: Labor administrative hearing officer Jerry Cody, in a similar case, ruled that an employer is not relieved of his liability for contractual damages for work not provided. He ordered the employer to pay a complaining worker a total of $4,552 in unpaid wages, liquidated damages, and contractual damages. Cody also sanctioned the employer to pay $2,000 and disqualified him permanently from hiring alien workers in the CNMI.

Cody said if the employer fails to pay the award in a timely manner, the employer's insurer should pay the proceeds of the labor bond to the worker.

Submit questions on labor issues to *Saipan Tribune* via e-mail at editor@saipantribune.com, or by calling 235-6397, 235-2440, or 235-8747 and leaving a message at Ext. 133 or 135. You may also submit questions in person by writing it down and dropping it off at the *Saipan Tribune*'s office on the second floor of the CIC Centre on Beach Road, Garapan.

Fil-Am lawyer Nisperos to join husband on Saipan

By RODEL RODIS
ASIANWEEK

ASIANWEEK

Eleanor Nisperos, second from left, with husband Mike and their children, Marlo, a deputy district attorney, and Mike Jr., a law student.

We all need role models—heroes to blaze trails for us, to inspire us to do more.

It must have been very difficult for then 22-year-old Eleanor Oducayen when she entered prestigious Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California in Berkeley in 1969. There were no other pinays in her class. In fact, they had never seen one at Boalt Hall. More than that, Eleanor, was the first-ever pinay at any law school in California. Eleanor had no role models to look up to in the profession she aspired to enter. She was it.

When she graduated from Boalt and passed the bar in 1972, Eleanor was hired as a Deputy Attorney General in the California Attorney General's Office in Sacramento, the first Filipino to hold that post. Of the 32 Deputy AGs in her office, 30 were males, and almost all of them were white. In short order, Eleanor ascended the ranks and was appointed Administrative Law Judge to handle unemployment insurance cases. She rose to become Chief Judge in her department. Both were firsts for her as well.

In 1981, when there was a critical mass of Filipino attorneys in Northern California, Eleanor and a dozen of us organized the Filipino Bar Association of Northern California. Although virtually all of us were men, there was no question of who was most qualified to lead us to become a professional organization. Eleanor was unanimously elected president of FBANC.

After 35 years of working for the state of California, Eleanor quietly retired this month and was set to celebrate her retirement with her husband and her now-grown kids by going to dinner in San Francisco from their home in Oakland. On the way, they stopped by a friend's retirement party in Oakland's Chinatown.

It was not a friend's retirement party, as it turned out, it was hers. Eleanor was genuinely surprised to see her family members, her fellow judges and old colleagues from the Attorney General's office, some of whom flew in from Los Angeles, and her FBANC and community friends who all had been waiting at the Silver Dragon to shower her with warmth and affection in a testimonial roast.

The surprise party was planned by Eleanor's husband of 35 years, Mike Nisperos, who will readily admit that his role model is his wife.

Mike, a U.S. Marine veteran, did two tours in Vietnam and was returning to Oakland in 1971 when, at a party, he met Eleanor, just graduating from law school. In terms of academic accomplishments, they seemed an odd pair at the time, but love conquers all. After a brief courtship, Mike and Eleanor married and Mike went to college on his G.I. Bill, graduating from UC Berkeley in 1975, and then, following Eleanor's lead, going on to Boalt Hall as well, graduating in 1978.

Recently, Mike accepted an appointment as Deputy Attorney General for the Marianas Islands to serve in Saipan, where he will be joined by Eleanor. They have two kids, Marlo, a Deputy District Attorney in Sonoma County, and Mike Jr., a law student at McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento.

By any standard, Eleanor Oducayen Nisperos fully fits the bill of a positive role model for the Filipino American community.

Rodel Rodis, a Bay Area attorney, is two-time president of the Public Utilities Commission and a long-time City College trustee. Reach Rodel Rodis at rodel50@aol.com. Reprinted with permission.

RP economy grew 5.4 percent

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—The Philippine economy expanded by 5.4 percent in 2006, a growth rate that fell short of government and market forecasts due to typhoons that battered farms and dented agriculture output, government data showed Wednesday.

Economic Planning Secretary Romulo Neri said growth prospects for 2007 depend primarily on the strength of U.S. demand for Philippine exports and on investment inflows. But Neri said he remains optimistic that the Philippine economy can achieve the government's goal of 6.1 percent to 6.7 percent gross domestic product growth this year.

The National Statistical Coordinating Board showed GDP growth in 2006 was slightly below the government's target of 5.5 percent to 6.1 percent, and the 5.5 percent average forecast by six economists polled by Dow Jones Newswires.

Fourth quarter 2006 GDP growth of 4.8 percent on year also fell short of economists' average forecast of 5.3 percent, the government said.

"The recovery of agriculture and the healthy performance of the services sector helped prop up full-year economic growth," Neri told a news conference. "Nonetheless, the tropical cyclones that hit the country in the fourth quarter have affected agriculture output."

He said the government estimates that the damage caused by the typhoons shaved off 0.4 percentage points from the GDP growth rate.

Agriculture output, which accounts for a fifth of GDP and employs four of every 10 Filipinos, rose 1.9 percent on year in the fourth quarter, down from the 3.7 percent expansion in the year-earlier quarter and its slowest growth rate since the third quarter of 2005. Farm output was up 4.1 percent in 2006.

Gross national product, which includes net income from abroad, rose 6.2 percent in 2006 and 5.9 percent on year in the fourth quarter.

Group shuns probe into political killings

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—Philippine left-wing groups will not cooperate with an official investigation into political killings after President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo described them as fronts for communist rebels, one of their leaders said Thursday.

"Her pronouncement shows the government's official attitude towards legal activist organizations," said Renato Reyes, secretary-general of Bayan, the country's largest left-wing alliance.

He said labeling legal organizations as communist makes them "legitimate targets of military operations" in the government's campaign to defeat a 38-year-old insurgency.

Arroyo, under increasing pressure to stop the killings that have left hundreds dead since 2001, told foreign diplomats that communist New People's Army rebels and some soldiers have both been involved in the assassinations. But she defended the military against charges of human rights violations.

Arroyo earlier this week received a report by a fact-finding commission she created in August that reportedly blamed majority of the killings on soldiers.

Without specifying figures and identifying groups by name, she said there was a discrepancy between the number of victims reported by "front organizations of communists" and police records. Police have reported investigating only 114 cases.

Reyes said at least 365 activists affiliated with Bayan are among more than 800 people killed since 2001, when Arroyo took power. More than 200 other activists have been abducted and remain missing, he said.

Troops raid alleged terrorist hideout; 1 killed, 3 arrested

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—Philippine marines and police raided a suspected hideout of Muslim militants on a lake island southeast of Manila early Thursday, killing one man and arresting an alleged bomb-maker and two accomplices, officials said.

The main target, a Filipino suspected of ties to the al-Qaida-linked Abu Sayyaf group, Sanjali Uttoh, was arrested with two other men, police said.

His aide, Mohammed Uttoh Ampatuan, was shot dead after militants opened fire on troops using rubber boats to storm an island in Laguna Lake, near Taytay town, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) east of the capital, said police Senior Superintendent Asher Dolina.

Five militants escaped, and security forces recovered weapons, homemade bombs and C-4 plastic explosives, according to Dolina and marine spokesman Lt. Col. Ariel Caculitan.

It was not immediately clear if the militants were armed, or whether they fled the island. Police and military personnel were scouring the area and have set up road checkpoints.

Uttoh is a former member of the main Muslim separatist group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and was implicated in several bombing attacks blamed on the Abu Sayyaf and its Indonesian allies from the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network, Caculitan said.

AP

Philippine National Police Chief Oscar Calderon, left seated, presents in a news conference at the PNP headquarters at suburban Quezon city north of Manila, alleged terror suspects, from left in yellow shirts, Jukarnen Utto, Sanjali Utto and Abdullah Alimudin following their arrest in a raid Thursday Feb. 1, 2007 at the southeastern suburb of Taytay.

AP

VIN D' HONNEUR
Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, left, offers a toast with Papal Nuncio Archbishop Fernando Filoni, the Vatican's envoy to Manila, and also dean of the Diplomatic corp during the Vin D' Honneur at the Malacanang presidential palace in Manila, Philippines, on Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2007.

PHILIPPINE BRIEFS

Fuel tanker truck blast kills 20

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—About 20 people were killed when a fuel tanker truck exploded as it was negotiating an uphill road in the southern Philippines, a police official said Friday.

The truck, carrying liquefied petroleum gas, slowed as other vehicles alerted the driver to a fire beneath the tanker, regional police chief Jaime Caringal said. It suddenly exploded as an oncoming passenger bus was passing by.

"We don't know the exact number of casualties because they were rushed to different hospitals, but the initial estimate of the provincial (police) director is that 20 were killed," Caringal said. "The tanker disintegrated."

9 fishermen rescued after 4 days at sea

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—A Vietnamese fishing boat rescued nine Filipino fishermen who spent four days adrift in the South China Sea, officials said Friday.

The men were spotted clinging to an improvised raft 130 nautical miles (150 miles or 240 kilometers) west of Subic on Wednesday, said Commander Joseph Coyme, Philippine coast guard spokesman.

Subic is 80 kilometers (50 miles) northwest of Manila.

The fishermen's motorboat had capsized on Jan. 27 after big waves and strong winds snapped the craft's outrigger, a coast guard report said.

In the next three days, several foreign vessels passed but did not stop to rescue the drifting men, the report said. On the fourth day, crewmen from the Vietnamese fishing boat plucked them from the sea.

A coast guard vessel was sent to the area to pick up the fishermen, who were treated by a doctor on board and then brought to coast guard headquarters in Manila on Friday, officials said.

Aussie lab to boost RP fight vs terror

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—Australian and Philippine officials opened a new forensic explosives laboratory on Thursday that authorities said would boost Manila's fight against terrorism and help identify bombers' "signatures."

The Philippine National Police's Forensic Explosives Laboratory, built with a A$450,000 (US$348,684; €269,170) grant from Australia, will allow investigators to conduct sensitive analysis of explosives used in bombings in the country, Australian Ambassador Tony Hely said.

"This is our contribution to the Philippine government in fighting global terrorism, a continuation and consolidation of our teamwork to fight terror," he added.

Director General Oscar Calderon, the national police chief, thanked Australia for the help.

"The Philippines is one of the nations in Southeast Asia menaced by terrorist groups, particularly by Muslim fanatics in Mindanao involved in bombings in the region and in Metro Manila," Calderon said. "This new lab will enhance our capability to build airtight evidence versus captured bombers."

PINOYSTYLE

Papa, please come home next Christmas

By KENNETH DEL ROSARIO
INQUIRER

Seven-year-old Geronimo "Jerome" Caluza wanted nothing in the world than to have his papa by his side this Christmas season. His father, Daniel, 44, has been working as an electrician in Saudi Arabia for more than 20 years now and has since spent only one Christmas together with his family.

Jerome said that if ever he was made to see only one person on Christmas, he would choose his papa, not Santa Claus. "I love my papa so much and I hope he'll have fun there (in Saudi) this holiday," he continued.

Every Christmas, Jerome never asked his parents for presents. All he wanted was to spend the holidays with his dad to complete their family.

No recollections

Youngest of three, Jerome virtually grew up without his father's presence and had no clear recollections of him because Jerome was only 8 months old when, in December 1999, right before Christmas, his papa had to leave to work again in Saudi Arabia.

Now in first grade at the San Diego Elementary School in San Pablo City, Laguna, Jerome loves mathematics and has been a constant topnotcher in his class since kindergarten.

"It is my parent's hard work, especially my dad's, that inspires me," Jerome told the Inquirer. "I know how hard my father is working abroad and I want to make him proud of me someday so I study very hard."

Many times the family would have no money for Noche Buena (the traditional Christmas meal) on Christmas Eve due to delays with the remittances or the money sent by Jerome's father isn't enough. "The money we receive for our Noche Buena, we used to pay off our debts," Jerome said.

It's a good thing Jerome and his two siblings, Daniel Junior, 15, and Nielisa, 12, were raised by their mother not to expect that their father was making a fortune abroad.

Jerome said he's used to not having new clothes, shoes or toys on Christmas and it's okay with him. "What we do is call papa and talk to him over the phone on Christmas," Jerome added, happy that even though his father is not here physically, he can always feel his father's love for them.

Wish granted

Last year, Jerome's wish to spend Christmas with his father was granted. His father came home a couple of weeks before Christmas day.

Jerome remembered jumping happily in their house when his father called to tell them the good news. At last, he would see his father in person whom he initially got to know only by phone, pictures and letters.

"My siblings and I were all very excited," Jerome said, adding that he couldn't wait for his papa to arrive.

The day his father arrived, only his mother, Alice, went to the airport to fetch Daniel as they did not have enough money for all of them to pick him up. "I even borrowed the money I used to get to the airport," Alice told the Inquirer in a separate interview.

Waiting at their house, Jerome and his siblings were restless and could hardly contain themselves with the thought of seeing their father after a long absence. Jerome led the general cleaning in their house to make it as clean as possible for their papa.

Together at last

When his parents arrived from the airport, Jerome immediately ran to his father and hugged him. "I ran to him and said 'I love you, papa,'" Jerome recalled, teary-eyed after missing his father so much and being able to hug him for the first time.

After they hugged and exchanged greetings, his father handed each one of them special gifts. Jerome received a black leather jacket from Saudi which he immediately tried on and found to be a perfect fit. His mother got a lipstick while his two siblings got their own leather jackets as well.

"I know they were not the most expensive gifts, but they came from papa so I love my jacket very much," Jerome remarked, saying the item is now his favorite apparel and always tries to wear it whenever possible, even when the weather is not cold as it reminds him of his papa.

For the first time in their lives, the family was together on Christmas Eve. "Noche Buena has never tasted better. Christmas is so much happier when papa is around," Jerome said, referring to last year's Christmas.

Hit back! & A retro party

Photos and Text By MARCONI CALINDAS
REPORTER

The L&M Enterprise and Tropex Garden compound in Fina Sisu turned back time Saturday night last week when owner and president Lito Mendoza celebrated his 60th birthday with a '60s and '70s theme.

A huge mirror ball, dancing strobe lights and remixes of retro music that were popular in the '70s complemented the party scene. Family members, friends and guests added to the merriment when all of them came in either '60s or '70s attire.

Mendoza, who has been on Saipan since 1975, was in a nostalgic mood as friends gave testimonials and surprise production numbers for him. He said the celebration was his best so far.

Fellow members from the Northern Marianas Badminton Federation rendered two dance presentations during the party. One group danced to the tune of OPM classic hit Bongga Ka Day and the other dance group presented a dance to the Supremes' Baby Love music.

It was indeed a Saturday Night Fever to remember.

M.ARCONI CALINDAS

NMBF members pose with celebrant Lito and wife Malou during the party.

M.ARCONI CALINDAS

NMBF members Elma Labuson, Macoi Aguda, Diane Darjuan and Janice Bungalos donned in '70s attire.

MARCONI CALINDAS

Birthday celebrant Lito Mendoza, third from left, is joined by wife and daughter with friends.

Baby Love Dancers Ingrid, Janice and Diane.

M.ARCONI CALINDAS

M.ARCONI CALINDAS

Bongga Ka Day dancers, from left, Elma, Merly, Babes and Abby.

Silence is Bong Revilla's best defense?

By DOLLY ANNE CARVAJAL
INQUIRER

I was swamped with e-mail and text messages about my column on Bong Revilla's love child, Luigi, with my friend L.G. But I heard nothing from Bong. At this point, silence may be his best defense. Politics has truly taught him much about damage control.

'Bubble Gang' resto

I had a blast with Ogie Alcasid at his Bubble Gang Toppings, located at the second floor of the FBR Bldg. in Katipunan, across Ateneo. He and his "Bubble Gang" co-stars and their cool PR, Allan Tom, have added a twist to the resto.

"We are now an eatery by day and a bar by night," says Ogie. "Wednesday is 'Celebrity Night' and we have guest DJs. We want celebrity friends to have a place to chill, no paparazzi and all. We will also throw birthday parties for celebrities, with open bar from 9 to 11 p.m. It's open to the public, too, at P100 entrance."

That night I spotted Pauleen Luna, Mark Herras, Ruffa Mae Quinto, Janno Gibbs, Bing Loyzaga, Regine Velasquez, Jolina Magdangal, Epi and Boy2 Quizon, John Estrada, Raymond Gutierrez, Nadia Montenegro, Ara Mina, Michelle Madrigal, Andrew Wolff and Will Devaughn.

Pauleen poured her heart out to me. She's devastated after her breakup with Marvin Agustin. To lighten the mood, I teased her to ask advice from Jolens because she knows Marvs inside out. Jolens chuckled. "Di naman naging kami ni Marvs."

Pauleen admits that she and Marvs still love each other. But sometimes one kind of love gives way to another. Pauleen had to give in to her parents.

Pauleen Luna

"They are not naman against Marvin. They just feel it's not the right time for us. Someday maybe we will get back together. But I don't believe in waiting."It's not true that Angel Locsi

It's not true that Angel Locsin caused the split-up. I was beside Pauleen when she called Angel to check how Marvs was coping. Angel was with Marvin in Baguio taping for "Asian Treasures."

Regine sat quietly sipping her Bloody Mary. It's obvious that no special event in Ogie's life would ever be complete without Regine around. Boy 2 kept pouring their house drink "Romansa" for anyone who passed his way. Nadia, Ogie and John played poker. Mark, Pauleen and I had a few tequila shots. "To the wounds that never heal!" I told Pauleen.

Epi ribbed Boy 2 for imitating his hairstyle. It was cool to see Janno and Bing partying like long lost friends instead of estranged lovers. Michelle and Pauleen ignored each other. Apparently, their long-standing gap because of JC de Vera ain't over.

Ruffa Mae would rather spare us the gory details of her "fling" with Bong Revilla, although she was alarmed when her name got dragged into the Lani-Greta-Bong controversy. All in all, it was one fantastic night. Ogie's gang really knows how to keep a party bubbling with fun.

Cool-off season

Seems it's cool-off season for celeb couples. Alfred Vargas and LJ Reyes, Polo Ravales and Ara Mina, Marvin Agustin and Pauleen Luna all claim their relationships are in a state of limbo. "Lack of time," they all say. Ain't it sad that they spend money the way they want to, but can't spend time as their hearts please?

I texted Marvin that I'm sad for him and Pauleen. It's an awful timing for a breakup—his birthday is coming up. He texted back: "No plans for my birthday. Buti na lang I have taping for 'Asian Treasures.' I'm in no mood to celebrate. Pray for us."

What good are all the treasures without his heart's treasure?

'Feb-ibig'

For V-day, ABS-CBN cooked up "Feb-ibig," a collection of kilig-packed programs. "Your Song" presents these ValenTEAMS:

Kim Chui and Gerald Anderson in Nina's "Someday"; John Prats, Heart Evangelista in MYMP's "With You"; Sarah Geronimo, Carlo Aquino in Sarah's "Carry My Love"; Ryan Agoncillo, Judy Ann Santos in "Let Me Say I Love You in a Song"; Diether Ocampo, Kristine Hermosa, Precious Lara Quigaman in "Click na Click."

Hearts will stay aflutter with "Da Adventures of Pedro Penduko" as the Pedro (Matt Evans)-Raquel (Olyn Meimban)- Hiyas (Melissa Ricks) love triangle gets even hotter.

Sparks didn't fly on the set between ex-lovers John and Heart. "Steady lang kami during the shoot," John says. He and his GF of five months (Miakka Lim) plan to spend V-day in Bora.

As for Diet, he never plans his Valentine. "I like things spontaneous," he says. "Just go with the flow."

Love is in the air and on the air every weekend starting Feb 3.

F.Y.I. (For Your Indulgence)

■ John Lloyd Cruz is elated that he's endorsing Unilab's Paracetamol Biogesic. Loydie says, "It comes in handy, sa dami ng headaches that show biz brings!"

What about heartaches? He laughs. "My heart has never been better. My GF (Liz Uy) keeps me grounded." Just as he admonishes everyone to stay safe with his extro line, "Ingat!" in the ad, Loydie is really cautious when it comes to matters of the heart.

■ Dennis Trillo is relieved that he has made peace with Mother Lily. They had a falling out when his role in "Mano Po 5" was given to Richard Gutierrez.

"New year, new start. Mother kept saying sorry. I gave her flowers. She cried. Walang katapusang yakapan. Parang eksena sa movie! I kept quiet on the issue for three months kasi kahit may sama ako ng loob, mas matindi pa rin yung utang na loob ko kay Mother." Just as his first single from his debut album now being played on radio declares—"All Out of Love."

Lea inspired

Before Lea Salonga leaves for her much-awaited Broadway comeback in "Les Miserables" next month, the country's pride pays tribute to her local followers with a collection of timeless songs, "Inspired," under Sony BMG. It's a product of her collaboration with her brother, Maestro Gerard Salonga, and her first studio album in seven years.

Among the 12 tracks are Lea's personal favorites like "Promise Me," "Land of the Loving" and her wedding song, "Two Words." She couldn't have chosen a better title for the album. It best describes her as a mother and world-class artist.

"I hum Nicole to sleep. Funny even when I'm not carrying her, I find myself swaying," Lea reveals. "It's become automatic. After giving birth, singing was such an ordeal. My body had to recover and adjust."

The high that motherhood gives her is higher than the highest notes in her vocal range. "Breastfeeding is heaven! It's nature's way of helping moms get back into shape after giving birth. That's how I lost weight. And it's incredible bonding time for Nic and me. When she starts going to school, I have to stay put in one place. I'd like her to study in Manila. I don't want her to grow up hating me for being away because of my work. I want to be around for all the milestones in her life. I'm willing to sacrifice career opportunities for her sake."

Lea doesn't want to dream Nicole's dreams for her. "I want her to decide what she wants to do with her life. I won't pressure her to be something she's not. I don't want her to be a woman at 10. I want her to grow up at her own pace."

Can hardly believe that our little "Annie" has her own little one. Lea's now living the wonderful "Tomorrow" she used to sing about. Her worldwide success continues to inspire us to have better a tomorrow, too.

Teysie's mom has a hundred voices

By BAYANI SAN DIEGO JR.
INQUIRER

"I was known as the woman with a hundred voices," the silver-haired septuagenarian tells you with imperious confidence. "I was an all-around radio talent."

You're more than willing to take her word for it, but veteran radio star Laura Hermosa is not taking any chances. In quick succession, she assumes the personas of a little boy, his female playmate, his mother, his grandmother … and a cackling witch.

For a while there, she seems possessed. "I often played Buruka, the witch on 'Lola Basyang,'" she recounts.

For good measure, she plays the various characters and, in an display of virtuosity, makes them experience near-death by drowning, gunshot, and stabbing.

So you see how, before becoming known as comedienne Tessie Tomas' mother, Laura Hermosa made a name for herself as a seasoned radio talent and director.

First radio serial

At 22, she joined the radio biz in 1950, via dzBB. "I also worked in the old dzBC studio in Sta. Lucia, near Kalentong. I worked with (radio) director Artemio Marquez and (fellow voice talents) Ernesto Ramos, Luz Fernandez, Romy Reyes and Esther Chavez. Among my shows were 'Aklat ng Pag-Ibig' and 'Digmaan ng Damdamin.'"

For her first radio serial, where she voiced the heroine's mother, she was paid the princely sum of P10, "plus P5 for additional voices."She was discovered by h

She was discovered by her teacher in Arellano High School in Sta. Cruz, Manila. "Mrs. Pedraza was a writer for the soap operas produced by the Philippine Manufacturing Company. She knew of my interest in acting; I had joined a lot of school programs."

After two years, she gave up radio because she had married lawyer Fernando Hermosa and moved to Catbalogan, Samar.

"I worked as a teacher in the province," she says. When they moved back to Manila, she resumed her career, working at dzXL (of the old CBN) in Intramuros. Among her popular programs was "Kahapon Lamang," anchored by Eddie Ilarde.

A pioneering working mom, she raised six children while doing radio shows—truly a balancing act, she notes. "Before reporting for work, I went to the market, cooked and did the laundry."

Laura also fetched her children from school. She remembers: "From Espiritu Santo, I took Tessie, who was 8 years old, to the station, where she did her homework. I asked my colleagues Helen Vela and Orly Punzalan to tutor her. Before I knew it, she was reading the scripts—in different voices!"

At 9, Tessie was hired to do voice work. "She played a little boy like Dennis the Menace, for P5 per script."

In 1964, Laura and Tessie were the models for Palmolive Soap. Tessie was 14.

"I also did voice work for radio commercials," says Laura. With her proficiency in different dialects, she was a much sought-after talent for radio ads. "I was born in Dagupan, Pangasinan, but I studied in Manila, and taught balarila (the National Language) in Samar."

To augment the family income, she went into buy-and-sell. "My friends called me 'the walking department store.' I would go to Clover Theater and Manila Grand Opera House and sell goods—watches, thermos bottles, chocolates, fruits— I had bought in Divisoria, Central Market, and Baclaran to the dancers and singers," she relates. Among her suki were stage entertainers Chuchi and German Moreno.

In the 1970s, she moved to dwWW, where she shared the air lanes with Kuya Cesar, Rod Navarro, Vic Morales, Tina Loy, and Inday Badiday. Later, she took on directing jobs for P25 per script, handling shows like "Teenage Diary."

"Radio is a good training ground," Laura says. "TV and movie directors looked up to radio talents."

It was only a matter of time before she crossed over, becoming a frequent guest on TV shows like "Buhay Artista," "Nida-Nestor Show" and "John en Marsha" in the 1960s and 1970s. She says her favorite director was the late Ading Fernando.

Movies, too

She also did a handful of movies, including "Relasyon" in 1982, where she played Vilma Santos' aunt. In 1987, she became a regular on the Tito Sotto-Sandy Andolong sitcom on IBC 13, "Hapi House," where she played nanny to Aga Muhlach, Isabel Granada and Chuckie Dreyfuss.

"Aga was often late," Laura recalls. "I always reminded him of the importance of being professional." She took her role as mentor to younger talents seriously.

These days, however, her most cherished role is that of lola to 14 grandchildren (including three great grandchildren).

At 78, she shows no signs of slowing down although she insists that she retired eight years ago.

"She's still very hyper," daughter Tessie gushes. "She takes care of the farm in Catbalogan. She's also into real estate."

Laura asserts: "I knew I couldn't be in show biz forever. Thus, I was very frugal with my earnings. I taught my children: "It's not how much you earn, but how much you save, that will decide your future."

INQUIRER

Laura Hermosa with her famous daughter, comedienne Tessie Tomas.

OPINYON

Absolute terror

There's The Rub
By CONRADO DE QUIROS
PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Don't look now, but we could wake up tomorrow in absolute fear for our lives. Courtesy of a government that likes springing nasty surprises on us while we sleep.

That's what's going to happen to us if we allow the current anti-terror bill to pass. It won't stop terror, it will unleash terror. The people standing in its way in the Senate are few, though quite formidable in the strength of their convictions. They include Nene Pimentel and Jamby Madrigal, both of whom have been raising shrill warnings about the new iniquity. As both point out, the anti-terror bill will mount full-blown martial law in this country.

The new terror bill ups the ante on the terrorist methods of fighting terror. Pimentel points out the exceptionally fascistic ones: One, it authorizes the surveillance, interception and recording of messages of suspected terrorists. Two, it allows the arrest without warrant and imprisonment of suspects on the basis of the say-so of anonymous informants and assets. Three, it allows the ironically named law enforcers access to the bank deposits and other property records of suspects. And four, it allows the same ironically named law enforcers to seize those same deposits and assets.

As Pimentel points out, the arrest without warrant of people on the say-so of hooded figures brings us straight back into the days of the Makapili. Well, what can you expect from a Macabebe? Metaphorically that is, she is a daughter of Lubao. But the comparison with the Japanese Occupation is accurate: We are living in similar times, under another Occupation, and with much the same results.

That such an obscenity has no place in a country that pretends to be sane—never mind democratic—is patent. But what makes it even more obscene from where I stand are three things.

First off, all that anti-terror posturing is no better or worse than all the gaya-gaya—from Elvis to basketball, from anti-communism to anti-terrorism—we've done with things American. Until George W. Bush took it upon his head to pose as God's avenging sword after 9/11, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo couldn't even spell the word terrorist, she was busy just trying to survive with Erap's loyalists making life miserable for her. Well, the very premises of Bush's anti-terror campaign, which GMA merely imported wholesale along with flour, are now being questioned not just by the world but by America itself. Certainly the American voters have rejected the idiot who spawned it, the one who said idiotically, "You are with me or against me," making the choice an easy one—would anyone in his right mind be for him? Americans have since rediscovered their right minds and turned him into a lame duck in the last elections—as Filipinos will do to GMA this coming May. But the point is clear: This is not fighting terror, this is mounting terror. This is not defending democracy, this is pulverizing democracy.

More than that, the way things are today, we already have most of the elements of martial law, as it is. We have political activists and journalists being slaughtered with impunity. We have elected local officials being ousted from office on one pretext or another, while the father of all liars, that fellow named Hello Garci, continues to thrive, and will probably become an elected official after May, "elected" in the same way his boss, GMA, got "elected" in 2004. We have dissent and protest being silenced by law and lokohan, by corruption and coercion, by madness and murder. Do we want a legal instrument that justifies all that, too?

But still even more than that, look at the utter stupidity, if not monstrosity of it all. Under the new anti-terrorism law, suspected terrorists will have themselves surveilled, will have their conversations tapped, will have their property confiscated, and will languish in jail after being deemed to have committed, or plotted to commit, or being capable of committing acts of terrorism against the citizens of this country.

Well, by God, by Allah, and by your leave, need the kind of anti-terror bill being loosed by GMA and one Ponce Enrile, who shares with GMA a talent for lying—he mounted a fake assassination attempt on himself to justify Marcos' martial law—like a hole in the head. We have someone who has committed an act of breathtaking terrorism against the good citizens of this country, whose guilt has been proven beyond a shadow of doubt by a serendipitous act of official Isafp monitoring (never mind surveillance), but who has not had her property confiscated, who has not had her name entered in the list of the world's most wanted criminals, who is not rotting in the wilds of Muntinlupa, the key to her cell delivered somewhere in the bottom of the Philippine Deep. She is in fact the self-appointed president of this country.

What can be a more terroristic act committed against the citizens of this country than planting a bomb at the heart of their vote? Planting a bomb in a church or schoolhouse doesn't come close to it. What could be more ironclad proof of it than the self-appointed winner of the elections caught on tape, in all the glory or terror of her distinctive, inimitable, DNA-imprinted voice, plotting with a Comelec commissioner not just to steal the vote but also to steal a public school teacher-cum-poll watcher, and to hold up the truth she carries in her heart for ransom? Better to admit as evidence the word of characters with bayongs on their faces?

We want to push back terror in this country? We want to stop terror in this country? We want to obliterate terror in this country? Easy.

Just throw the one person guilty as hell of it to the bottom of the Philippine Deep.

The rest is just fomenting terror. Pure, venomous, and absolute terror.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Where have donations to Bicol victims gone?

I visited the Bicol region last Dec.23 and saw the devastation. Before that, there were so many donations pouring in for my fellow Bicolanos from overseas, including some from Canada. As I visited the most devastated towns, particularly Padang and Guinobatan, I began to wonder where all the dollar donations went.

There were some 4,900 lives lost. With just the $1 million that Canada sent, the people who lost homes would have new houses standing by now. Is anybody wondering at all where the money went, or is this the work of the same corrupt government I had witnessed before that prompted me to leave the Philippines?

Guinobatan townsfolk are still trying to rebuild without aid from the government. People are borrowing money to rebuild their lives. There are people in Bicol who can only pray that it won't rain tomorrow, for fear of another lahar flow. Some places don't even have rice anymore.

We have been having fund drives here, to bring funds directly to the people, because local governments are corrupt, which is a reflection of the national leadership that we have.

"Bayanihan" [communal self-help] should be something all of us should rekindle. It is a very positive character that we have lost.

Teresa Ala
Alberta, Canada
via e-mail

Eroding competitive advantage

Filipinos are always proud of their English language skills. But it's not the be-all and end-all of gaining competitive advantage in the labor pool, especially in light of that there are more prized skills now than the ability to speak English, like quantitative skills, computer skills, science skills, etc.

Most of the Filipinos who end up going to U.S. universities are in business courses (like me) or in liberal arts. Very few are in the sciences and engineering. In contrast, Indians go to science and engineering. That is why, after they graduate, Indians earn much, much more than Filipinos.

Even in business process outsourcing, you'll see we are losing ground, especially in the higher-end outsourcing. The jobs that get outsourced to Filipinos are customer service, accounting, payroll, and data-entry. In India and China, the jobs that get outsourced to them are programming, research, drug testing, etc., which pay more.

The question really is, are there more and more Filipinos who are going into the sciences and engineering? It is not whether they can speak English.

Geraldine Zingapan
New York
via e-mail

The cult of the Santo Niño

Looking Back
By AMBETH OCAMPO
PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

There was an unusually large crowd of people assembled at the back of the Abbey Church of Our Lady of Montserrat in Mendiola, Manila, after Masses last Sunday. I had forgotten that it was the fiesta of Santo Niño de San Beda. There was a special blessing of children in the monastery parlor and the annual amusement fair "Frolics" on the school grounds. People did not seem confused that there was not one, but two images of the Santo Niño in the church: the old one, a replica of the Infant Jesus of Prague carved by Maximo Vicente in the last century that was high up in the main altar of the church; and a new one, more accessible and encased in glass at the back that looked like a pudgy doll. Then, there was a third image inside the cloister not known to the general public. These three images in one place made me hope that Michael Tan would cast his anthropological lens on the various fiestas of the Santo Niño held in different places in the country, especially Cebu, Aklan, Tondo and Mendiola.

One wonders what kind of religiosity attracts devotees to either the Santo Niño or the Nazareno of Quiapo in January. Both are images of Christ—one as a child, the other as an adult. One is small, cute and smiling; the other large, dark and in agony. There must be a cultural, historical and anthropological reason for the different devotions, a demographic difference that determines why devotees of the Señor Nazareno de Quiapo sympathize with a suffering Christ carrying a heavy wooden cross, with a crown of thorns drawing blood from his brow. The Nazareno is a dark man dressed in a purple robe, whose shade resembles that of the liturgical vestments for Lent, a gold belt with tassels wrapped on his waist. The Santo Niño, or Holy Child, is often a Caucasian or mestizo toddler, unless it is the dark Santo Niño de Cebu, vested in an elaborate costume of red, white and gold complete with a crown on its head of curly hair, a cape and golden boots. Its right hand is often raised in a gesture of blessing while the left holds a golden orb and/or a cane of office. (How many toddlers in real life can stand up and keep still in such a costume?)

The Santo Niño has taken such a hold on the imagination and veneration of Filipinos that it has spawned various types and subtypes over the years that can be seen during exhibits and processions in January. I remember the famous "panaderia" [bread shop] in Malolos, Bulacan where people go for traditional "ensaimada" because an image of the Santo Niño held baking implements and stood watch between the oven and the cash register. If you go to the religious shops along Tayuman in downtown Manila, you will find Santo Niños in all shapes and sizes. Aside from the traditional costume of red and gold you can order an image in a variety of occupational uniforms: fireman, policeman, doctor, street sweeper, etc. There is even one in rubber slippers, shorts and sleeveless "sando" undershirt that was described as a "yagit" [street urchin]. The Santo Niño is so much a part of Philippine life that I have actually seen families shopping in the children's clothing section of Shoe Mart with their Santo Niño in tow. Now that is definitely worth a column from Michael Tan.

Some people are partial to the Nazareno, others are attracted to the Santo Niño. A number venerate the newborn Christ Child as seen from ivory images of the Niño Dormido, or Sleeping Infant, popular in 17th and 18th century Philippines. A wonderful dormido in the Central Bank comes complete with an elaborate silver filigree bed that formed part of the loot that the British took when it sacked Manila in the 18th century.

Surely, the type of image one venerates says a lot about his personality, and I could not but wince at the very odd fetish of a classmate in graduate school, who is now married and teaching abroad after earning her Ph.D. While she was outwardly conservative in speech and dress, she confessed that she was attracted to images of Christ crucified, the lean male body covered with nothing but a loincloth. Am I being a prude here, or isn't that truly perverse?

The first documented image of the Santo Niño was brought to the Philippines by Ferdinand Magellan. It was of Flemish make and was given to the wife of Humabon, lord of Cebu, as a baptismal gift when she was christened Juana, after the Spanish queen who is remembered in history as "Juana la Loca" or "Joanna the Mad." Despite the massacre of the Magellan expedition on the shores of Mactan in 1521, the image of the Santo Niño survived long enough to be recovered by Miguel Lopez de Legaspi in 1565, and thus was built what is today the Cathedral of the Santo Niño de Cebu.

Around this image a wild celebration has grown, called the Sinulog, which has been copied as the Ati-atihan in Kalibo, Aklan, and even the Dinagyang in Iloilo. Since these fiestas are developing into popular tourist attractions, some people worry that we are starting to forget their religious roots and intent.

The cult of the Santo Niño definitely requires a second, closer look and should encourage some sort of reflection, both religious and cultural, because the veneration of this image and its variants says so much about us and what makes us tick.

Comments are welcome at aocampo@ateneo.edu.

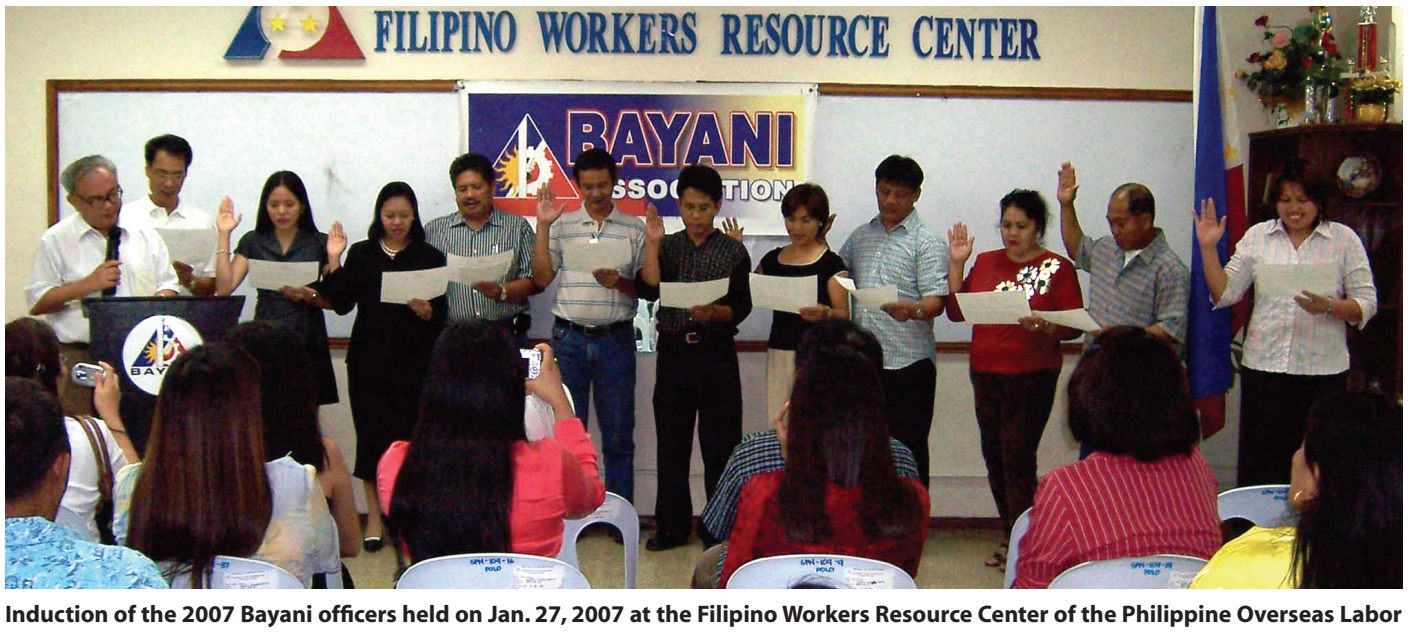
SAMU'T SARI

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

BAYANI ASSOCIATION ASSEMBLY

The Bayani Association holds a general assembly at the Filipino Workers Resource Center of the Philippine Overseas Labor Office on Jan. 21, 2007. This photo shows Bayani officers and members posing with Consul General Wilfredo Maximo and Consul Belinda Ante.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



Induction of the 2007 Bayani officers held on Jan. 27, 2007 at the Filipino Workers Resource Center of the Philippine Overseas Labor Office, Marianas Business Plaza. Picture shows Consul General Wilfredo DL. Maximo inducting the members of the Editorial Board, from left, Melvin J. Malvar (Editor), Jhonnette M. Principe (Arts & Production), Malou Pasol (Auditor), Ed Reyes (Arts & Production), Amado Tumbaga (Arts & Production), Paul Madriaga (Accountant), Leony Mendoza (Procurement), Ruel Balboa (Administrative Officer), Rose Arriola (Circulation), Diony Fabula (Circulation), Julie Ann Viola (Photographer). Not in picture, Haidee V. Eugenio (Asst. Editor), Rommel Relucio (Administrative Officer) and Jun Domingo (Photographer).

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Bayani Association's 2007 Board of Directors. Standing from left, Rose Guirit-Agulto (Board Member), Ana de Guzman (Board Member), Marie Caamic (Vice Chairman), Ed Reyes (Chairman), Evans Contado (Board Member), Hannah Schorr (Board Member) and Pauline Perez (Board Member). Seated from left, Welfare Officer Leonor Mabagal, Consul Belinda Ante, Consul General Wilfredo Maximo, and Labor Attache Joan Lourdes Lavilla.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Bayani Association's 2007 Executive Officers. Standing from left, Fernan Enano (President), Dory Mabuti (VP-Internal), Nick Malonzo (VP-External), Mylene Macapagal (Secretary), Evelyn Deazeta (Asst. Secretary), Orly de Leon (Treasurer), Tony Soriano (Asst. Treasurer), Mary Ann Madriaga (Auditor), Roger Salavaria (PRO-Internal), Fred Paras (PRO-External), Emil Garra (Marshall I), and Ramil Solano (Marshall II). Sitting from left, Welfare Officer Leonor Mabagal, Consul Belinda Ante, Consul General Wilfredo Maximo, and Labor Attache Joan Lourdes Lavilla.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The Bayani Association holds an election of its executive officers at the Filipino Workers Resource Center of the Philippine Overseas Labor Office on Jan. 21, 2007. Ed Reyes, left, Bayani Association chairman of the Board of Directors, presides over the election with assistance of, from left, Nick Malonzo, Lea Igrobay, Mylene Macapagal and Tony Soriano during the ballot counting.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The Bayani Association holds a get-together party at the Filipino Workers Resource Center of the Philippine Overseas Labor Office on Jan. 21, 2007. Here, Bayani officers, members and guests enjoy the sumptuous meal.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Game 6 of the Bayani Association's get-together party: Find your animal group. Julie Abad and Rose Arriola seem to be saying "moo... moo...!"

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Game 1 of the Bayani Association's get-together party: Bring me...the longest key!

Maharlika
PINOY LIFE IN THE MARIANAS

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